

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECHO

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**WILLIAMS' WINNER BREAKS KINGSHOLM HEARTS
UNLIKELY HERO SECURES CUP VICTORY FOR BATH**

IN ENTHRALLING SEMI-FINAL

GLOUCESTER 19 BATH 24

There are defeats, there are semi-final defeats and then there are last minute, semi-final defeats against Bath.

Yesterday, the pain they suffered at the hands of their greatest rivals was made even greater still, arriving as it did in the final throes of an extraordinary chaotic Powergen Cup contest.

When the lungs could not take another meaningful breath and muscles hurt so badly that even walking became a feat of unimaginable pain, Bath stole a place at Twickenham with a last-minute extra-time try from Andy Williams, their Welsh scrum-half operating out of position on the wing.

Had Robbie Fleck, Mike Tindall, Alex Crockett or Brendon Daniel been remotely fit, Williams would not even have started, but he will wake this morning certain of hero status in the Georgian city.

In a game that stretched the boundaries of physical endurance and mental stamina to the limits of acceptability, these two west country institutions slugged themselves to within seconds of a sudden death drop-goal shoot-out – a scenario that would have left even the strongest nerved among the Kingsholm cognoscenti contemplating a silent prayer or two.

And then, in the 103rd minute, Bath launched one final attack that started in the brilliant hands of Olly Barkley and ended with Williams on the flank.

He kicked ahead with Gloucester's scrambling defence desperate to get across and cover the danger. But Williams went shoulder to shoulder with Jon Goodridge, the Cherry and White full-back, in a one-on-one foot race to the corner.

The infuriatingly odd shaped ball bumped and hugged the touchline but remained in play and Williams was strong enough to hurl himself in front of Goodridge and settle a purely domestic dispute that was seconds away from creating history.

Gloucester's players collapsed in utter desolation, their dreams shattered. Bath's exhausted team, who only minutes before had been scattered all over the battlefield receiving treatment for cramps and other injuries, found a deep reserve of energy from somewhere within to rush forward and celebrate with the try-scorer.

That it ever came to extra-time will infuriate Gloucester like nothing on earth. In the final minute of normal time, referee Ashley Rowden clearly signed for a home town penalty, 40 metres out head on in front of the sticks.

Gloucester played on, securing no meaningful advantage from a series of rucks but Rowden did not come back and award them the shot at goal that would have settled the game, to the deep-burning fury of their coach Dean Ryan.

"The referee awarded us a penalty, but didn't go back to it once the advantage was over. Now, we are in the last minute of a cup semi-final. What greater advantage could we have had other than a kick at goal?" he said.

"Are we really saying players should deliberately knock the ball on, just to secure the penalty? Surely that cannot be right."

Ryan certainly had a valid point but Gloucester may not have needed it had Henry Paul not missed with three of his seven penalty attempts.

In contrast Chris Malone only missed his last minute conversion of Williams' try, which hardly mattered anyway.

"I don't think I have ever been in a game of such contrasts, never mind one that has gone to extra-time," said the mauve, battered features of Jake Boer. "We are desperately disappointed, I really don't know what else to say.

"I thought we stuck in there well but they stuck the pressure back on us and we couldn't hold out."

Boer, an early replacement for Adam Balding who had his face rearranged following a full-frontal assault at the ruck, had been part of a forward effort that can pin medals on itself in terms of effort and hustling qualities.

Despite the brilliant footballing exploits of Geraint Lewis, Gloucester got the better of the loose forward exchanges, where Peter Buxton was an immense figure, and had also done remarkably well with an inexperienced front five against a unit that is regarded as Test quality.

They clung on grimly in the scrums, while the line-outs were one large public order issue throughout that drew the best from Alex Brown, Danny Grewcock and Steve Borthwick.

Bath dominated the early exchanges and after Paul and Malone had swapped two penalties apiece, Lewis created a brilliant Bath score.

Andy Gomarsall's clearance from a penalty only found the waiting hands of Matt Perry and after he had driven possession into heavy traffic to set up a ruck, Lewis, a rangy loose forward, made a clinical line break and sent Joe Maddock in for the score with a perfectly-timed pass.

Gloucester then enjoyed the vast majority of the second 40 minutes by getting in behind Bath's defence but were unable to close the game out.

The try created by James Simpson-Daniel and finished in scintillating style by Seti Kiole emphasised everything good about their game.

And had Goodridge been able to locate the ball after another twisting Simpson-Daniel assault, the home side may well have got home.

But they spent most of the afternoon chasing when they should have been in front. Both Paul and Malone missed drop-goal attempts in the dying stages of normal time but it was Bath who dominated extra-time.

Their forwards suddenly found an extra gear to pin Gloucester inside their own half during the cramp-inducing final moments.

And then Williams, one of the most unlikely match winners, settled a captivating contest to shatter Kingsholm hearts.

GLOUCESTER : J. Goodridge; M. Garvey, J. Simpson-Daniel, T. Fanolua, S. Kiole; H. Paul, A. Gomarsall; N. Wood (T. Sigley 80), N. Curnier, G. Powell, A. Eustace, A. Brown, P. Buxton, A. Hazell (M. Cornwell 90), A. Balding (capt.) (J. Boer 24).

BATH : M. Perry; A. Williams, A. Higgins, O. Barkley, J. Maddock (S. Booth 80); C. Malone, N. Walshe (M. Wood 90); M. Stevens (D. Bell 100), L. Mears, D. Bell (D. Barnes 87), S. Borthwick (capt.), D. Grewcock, G. Lewis (G. Delve 71), J. Scaysbrook, Z. Feaunati.

STAR MAN : Peter Buxton.

REFEREE : A. Rowden (RFU).

ATTENDANCE : 13,000.

ONE MINUTE: Chris Malone penalty.
Gloucester 0, Bath 3.

SEVEN MINUTES: Henry Paul penalty.
Gloucester 3, Bath 3.

EIGHT MINUTES: Malone penalty.
Gloucester 3, Bath 6.

11 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Gloucester 6, Bath 6.

18 MINUTES: Joe Maddock try, Malone conversion.
Gloucester 6, Bath 13.

21 MINUTES: Paul penalty.
Gloucester 9, Bath 13.

36 MINUTES: Noel Curnier yellow card. Malone penalty.
Gloucester 9, Bath 16.

39 MINUTES: Matt Stevens yellow card. Paul penalty.
Gloucester 12, Bath 16.

61 MINUTES: Seti Kiole try, Paul conversion.
Gloucester 19, Bath 16.

67 MINUTES: Malone penalty.
Gloucester 19, Bath 19.

EXTRA-TIME.

103 MINUTES: Andy Williams try.
Gloucester 19, Bath 25.[sic]